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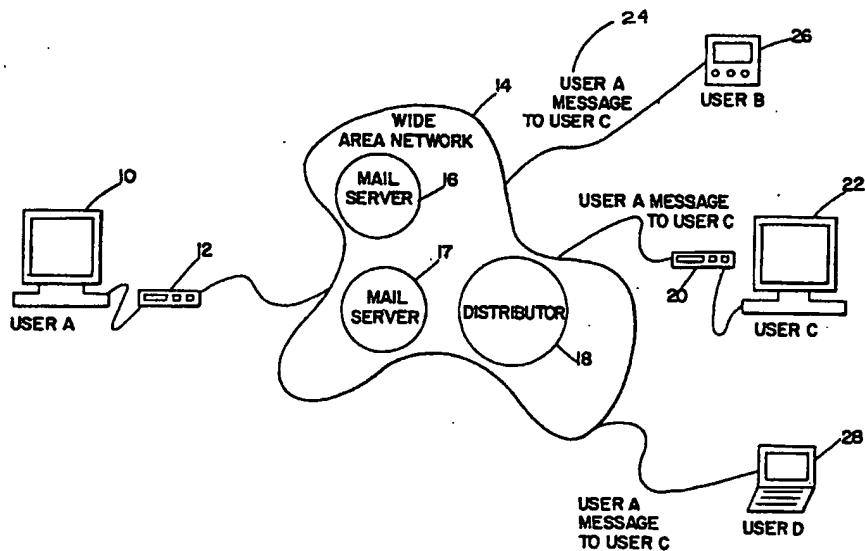


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(54) Title: RULES BASED ELECTRONIC MESSAGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM



(57) Abstract

A system for managing electronic messages (24) is disclosed. Recipients (22, 26, 28) of electronic messages may define a set of rules for accepting incoming messages. These rules are applied by a message distributor (18) at substantially the initial point of distribution so that delays in routing messages are reduced. Additionally, network (14) traffic may be reduced because message routing is more direct.

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RULES BASED ELECTRONIC MESSAGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

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The present invention relates generally to a system for managing electronic messages, and particularly, to a system for managing delivery of electronic messages according to the message recipient's preferences.

Electronic mail, or e-mail, provides a convenient and easy means for two or more individuals to communicate electronically. E-mail systems today help users send text-based and binary messages through extensive communication networks so that two or more users, who may be in remote locations, can communicate. E-mail may also be used for delivery of important business, financial, sports and other types of information from centralized repositories. The use of e-mail today has become so pervasive that many users now need a way to manage the influx of messages sent to their electronic mailboxes.

Today, most e-mail messages are stored in an electronic mailbox until the recipient reads them. To aid the recipient in reading, the e-mail system presents a list of messages in chronological order. Users manage these messages by manually selecting and reading those messages that are of interest. Users often scan either the sender information or the subject heading to locate messages of interest. When the number of incoming messages is very large, the process of scanning and selecting messages to read may be very time consuming. Actually reading and responding to or forwarding the messages takes additional time. All message management decisions and related actions are left to the user.

Some e-mail systems today provide more sophisticated mechanisms—sometimes referred to as “filter and forward” mechanisms—for sorting, selecting, and responding to messages. With the mechanisms, users may define specific criteria—or rules—by which

messages are presented and handled in order to meet their personal preferences. For example, users define a rule so that all incoming messages are routed automatically to a different mailbox or perhaps, a paging device. A rule may be defined so that an incoming message triggers the automatic sending of a related message to a specific group of users. Another rule 5 may result in the sorting and presentation of messages according to a priority assigned by the sender. Some systems may allow users to define a list of senders from whom the recipient is willing to receive messages while all other messages are discarded automatically. Some systems may also allow users to accept only those messages relating to particular topics. In many instances, messages may be presented according to a combination of preferences or rules 10 so that, for example, messages relating to a particular topic and from a specific sender may be forwarded automatically to a select group of users interested in the topic.

In addition to providing different rule sets for the filtering and forwarding of messages, e-mail systems may apply the rules at different times. For example, in many e-mail systems responsibility for the filtering and forwarding of messages is distributed among the servers 15 responsible for distributing the messages to individual users. If the recipient's server is not available, then the rules are not applied. Therefore, a message that should be forwarded to interested parties will not be sent until the recipient's server is available to apply the rules and perform the necessary actions. As a result, there may be a significant time delay between the time that a message is sent and the time that other interested parties learn of the message.

20 Even if the server is available, time delays may result because the message must go to the server responsible for servicing the recipient before the rules are applied. If the recipient has defined a rule for the message to be forwarded automatically, the message makes an unnecessary, intermediate stop at the server before being forwarded according to the intended recipient's rule.

Rules may also be applied when messages arrive at a client that performs mail services. However, significant time delays may result if the client is not available. In addition, network traffic may increase as messages from the client must travel to a central distribution point before being forwarded to the appropriate location. The same problems that exist when a 5 server applies rules late in the distribution process are present when a client applies the rules. The forwarding of messages to others is delayed until the message arrives at the client and the client is able to apply the rules.

The present invention addresses the problems that result when filter and forward rules are applied to electronic messages late in the distribution process. In the present invention, 10 message management rules defined by the intended recipient are applied soon after the originator sends the message so that messages may be forwarded or new messages generated and sent to other users regardless of whether the message may be delivered immediately to the intended recipient. Using the present invention, users specify message selection criteria based on attributes of incoming messages. Next, users specify the action to be associated with 15 messages that meet the selection criteria. A distributor then applies the rules at the beginning of the message distribution process so that the intended recipient's specified actions are carried out even if the intended recipient is unable to receive the message. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the rule definition and application services are provided by an information service that has the ability to support a large number of users and the ability 20 to accept incoming messages from a variety of other sources. The advantages of the present invention are explained further by the accompanying drawings and detailed description.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a flow chart of the steps for defining rules to be applied to a recipient's incoming messages;

Figure 2 is a diagrammatic view of the system organization for a preferred embodiment;

5 Figure 3 is a flow chart of the steps for applying the user-defined rules to a recipient's incoming messages; and

Figure 4 is a flow chart of the steps for applying the rules during message distribution.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENT(S)

10 Referring now to Figure 1, there is a preferred embodiment of the system of the present invention. Preferably, to send a message to User C 22, User A connects to an information service wide area network 14 via a modem 12. User A may be, but is not required to be, a subscriber of the information service. User A may use other means for connecting to the information service without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

15 User A's message may pass through one or more information service mail servers before User C's workstation 22 may retrieve it via a modem 20. In some instances, the servers through which the message passes perform one or more operations on the message before sending it to the next server. Additionally, one server may call another server to provide information necessary to complete an operation.

20 When User A's message arrives at the information service to be delivered to User C (i.e., at the point of distribution), User C's message delivery preferences are examined to determine if any special rules should be applied to User A's message. Preferably, the information service distributor 18 is responsible for applying the rules to User A's message. If, for example, User C wants a copy of all messages from User A to be sent directly to Users

B 26 and D 28, the distributor will ensure that arrangements are made to send User A's message 24 to Users B and D, even if User C's electronic mailbox is unavailable or User C is not logged in.

Referring now to Figure 2, there is shown a diagrammatic view of a preferred 5 embodiment of the present invention. Figure 2 shows the organization of servers responsible for the rule definition and application as well as message distribution.

Referring now to Figure 3, preferably, the rule definition process begins with the user specifying the message selection criteria 12. The selection criteria described herein is exemplary only. Fewer criteria or more detailed criteria may be used without departing from 10 the scope and spirit of the present invention. Preferably, the user specifies the range of dates during which each rule will be active 14. Another selector may be an importance value such as high, normal, or low 16. A message type, such as text or binary, may be specified 18. Preferably, the user may specify a subject or originator value 20, 22.

Next, the user specifies a message action to be performed when the message selection 15 criteria are met 24. The actions described herein are exemplary only. Other actions may be specified as well without departing from the scope and spirit of the present invention. If the associated action is to create a new message 26, then preferably, the user specifies a list of new message recipients as well as a subject and body for the new message 28. Other options may be specified for the new message such as importance or type. If the associated action is 20 to forward the message 30, then preferably, the user specifies the forwarding address 32. If the associated action is to delete the incoming message 36, then preferably, an indicator for this action is associated with the message selection criteria 36.

In the next step 38, the validity of the rule is established so that the distributor is able to carry out the specified actions when the message selection criteria are met. In step 40, the

valid rules are stored for later retrieval by the distributor. The same process may be used to define multiple rules. Preferably, the user is given the option of specifying an order in which the rules should be applied to incoming messages.

Referring now to Figure 4, there is shown the steps for applying the user-defined rules during message distribution. Initially, the message is sent to a mail server capable of retrieving information about the recipient 12. The mail server determines whether the recipient has defined rules for incoming messages 14. If the recipient has not defined message management rules, then the message is delivered directly to the recipient 16. If the recipient has defined message management rules, then the recipient's rules are retrieved 18 and applied to the message 20. Finally, the message is delivered according the rules 22. For example, if the incoming message should result in the distribution of a new message to 5 other users, the mail server and distributor coordinate activities to ensure that the new message is created according to the rules specified by the recipient and that the new message is delivered to each of the 5 other users.

Preferably, the retrieval and application of the message management rules are performed by a distributor working in conjunction with one or more mail servers. In an alternative embodiment, the rule retrieval and application and message delivery functions may be performed by one entity. Additionally, the functions may be performed by several entities. More important than the number of entities involved is the point at which the rules are applied. The present invention applies the rules soon after the message is sent by the originator so that greater efficiencies result.

The ability of the distributor to interpret user-defined rules and arrange for delivery of message based on those rules is unique to the present invention. The intended recipient's rules for message management are carried out regardless of whether the intended recipient is able to

receive the message because the rules are applied substantially at the primary point of distribution. Several benefits result from the approach of the present invention. First, network traffic may be reduced because any additional messages that should be sent as a result of the intended recipient's preferences are generated and sent from the central distribution point
5 when User A's message arrives rather than from an alternative point that requires messages to be routed through the central distribution point anyway. Second, if the message should be forwarded directly to another recipient, network traffic may be reduced by eliminating the stop at the intended recipient's mailbox—especially if the message must return to the centralized distribution point. Finally, the present invention results in better resource utilization because
10 messages that the intended recipient does not want to see may be discarded early in the distribution process. The elimination of unnecessary message stops, the elimination of the dependency of message delivery on the availability of intended recipient's mailbox, and the reduction in network traffic result in the more timely delivery of important personal and business information in the form of electronic messages.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An electronic messaging system comprising:
 - a first device capable of sending an electronic message;
 - a second device capable of receiving said electronic message;
- 5 a wide area network capable of accepting an electronic message directly or indirectly from said first device and capable of sending said electronic message to said second device or a computer network linked to said second device;
 - a set of rules defining which electronic messages should be sent to said second device;
 - a memory unit for storing said set of rules;
- 10 a distributor connected to said wide area network capable of applying said set of rules to said electronic message from said first device, at substantially the point of arrival of said electronic message at said wide area network.
2. The system of claim 1, wherein a rule from said set of rules applied to said electronic message may cause the generation of one or more new messages to be sent to one or more different devices.
- 15 3. The system of claim 1, wherein a rule from said set of rules applied to said electronic message may cause a message to be forwarded to a different device.
4. The system of claim 1, wherein said distributor is part of an online information service wide area network.
- 20 5. The system of claim 1, wherein said set of rules includes a rule based on the originator of an electronic message.
6. The system of claim 1, wherein said set of rules includes a rule based on the subject of an electronic message.

7. The system of claim 1, wherein said set of rules includes a rule based on the priority of said electronic message.
8. The system of claim 1, wherein said set of rules includes a rule based on the electronic message type.
- 5 9. The system of claim 1, wherein a recipient of messages at said second device defines said set of rules.
10. A method for managing electronic messages, said method comprising the steps of providing a first device capable of sending an electronic message; providing a second device capable of receiving said electronic message; providing a computer network capable of accepting an electronic message directly or indirectly from said first device and capable of sending said electronic message to said second device or a computer network linked to said second device; defining a set of rules for accepting electronic messages at said second device; applying said set of rules to said electronic message at substantially the point of arrival of said 15 electronic message at said computer network, said application of rules being performed by a distributor that is part of said computer network; transmitting to said second device said electronic message that conforms to said set of rules, said transmission of said electronic message being performed by said computer network.
11. The method of claim 10, wherein a recipient of electronic messages at said second 20 device defines said set of rules.
12. The method of claim 10, wherein said distributor is part of an online information service network.

13. The method of claim 10, wherein a rule from said set of rules applied to said electronic message may cause the generation of one or new messages to be sent to one or more different devices.
14. The method of claim 10, wherein a rule from said set of rules applied to said electronic message may cause a message to be forwarded to a different device.
15. An electronic messaging system comprising:
 - a first device for sending an electronic message;
 - a second device for receiving an electronic message;
 - a computer network for accepting electronic messages directly or indirectly from said first device and for sending electronic messages to said second device or a computer network linked to said second device;
 - a set of rules defining which electronic messages should be sent to said second device;
 - a memory unit for storing said rules;
 - a distributor that is part of said computer network for retrieving said rules from said memory unit, interpreting and applying said rules to said electronic message from said first device and for transmitting through said computer network to said second device or a computer network linked to said second device said electronic messages in conformance with said rules.

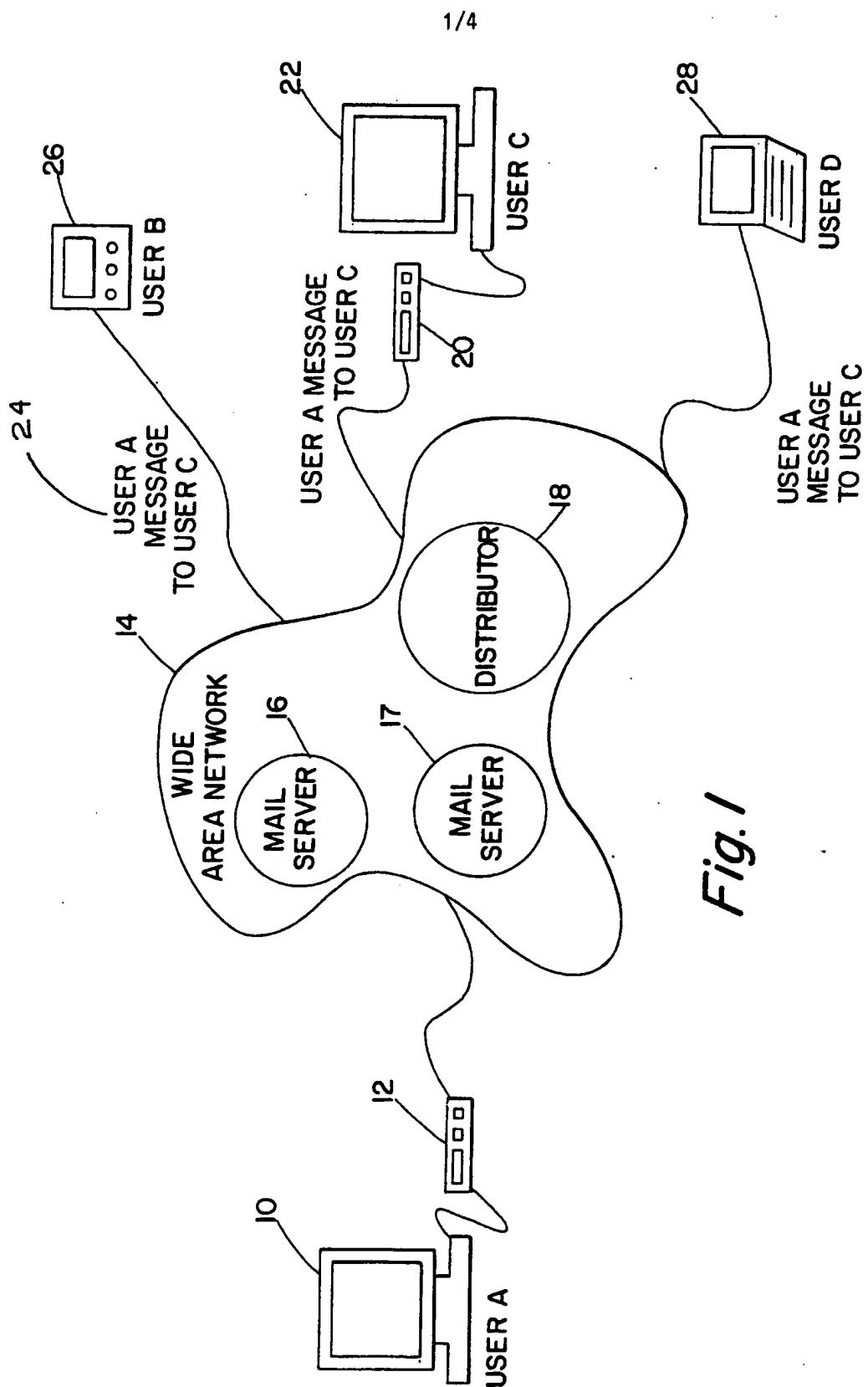


Fig. 1

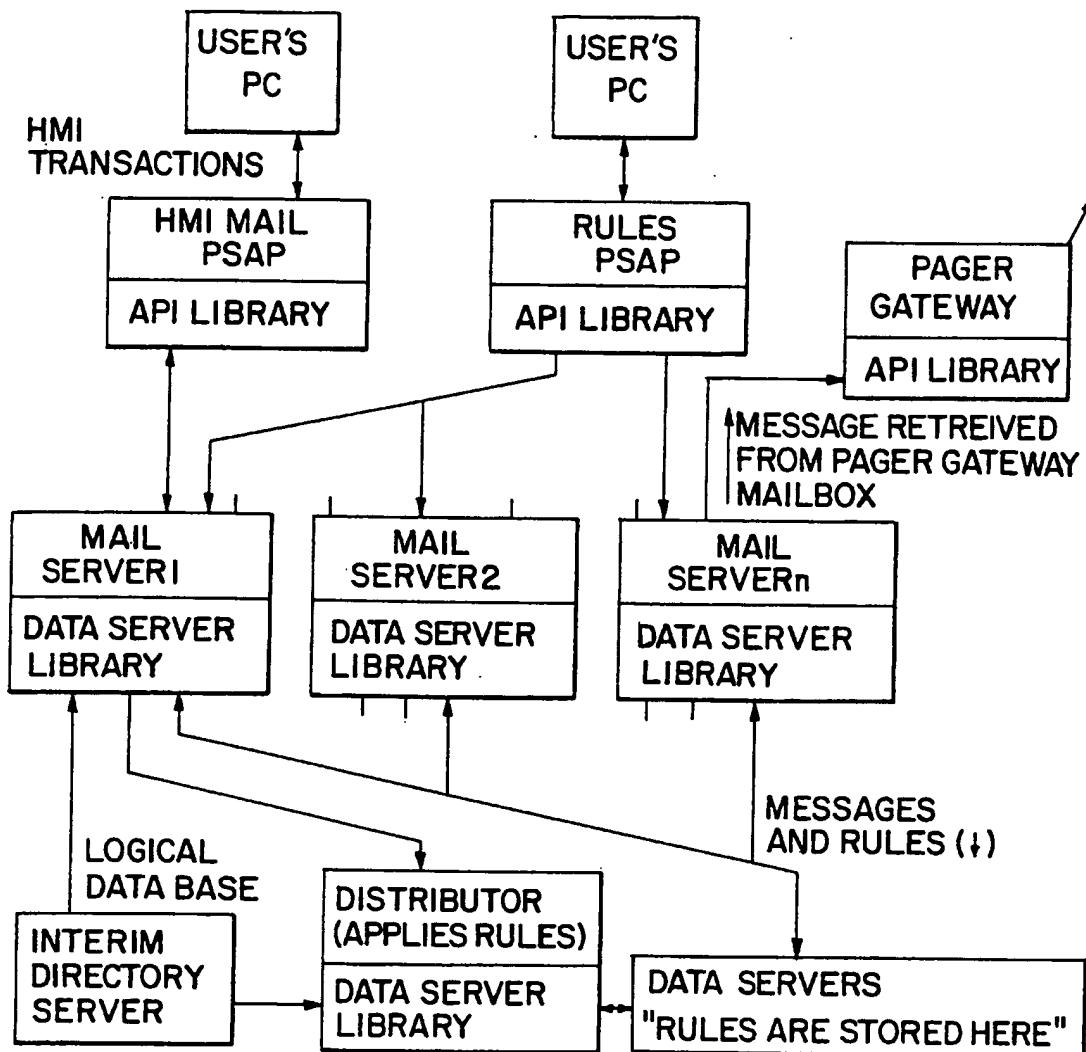
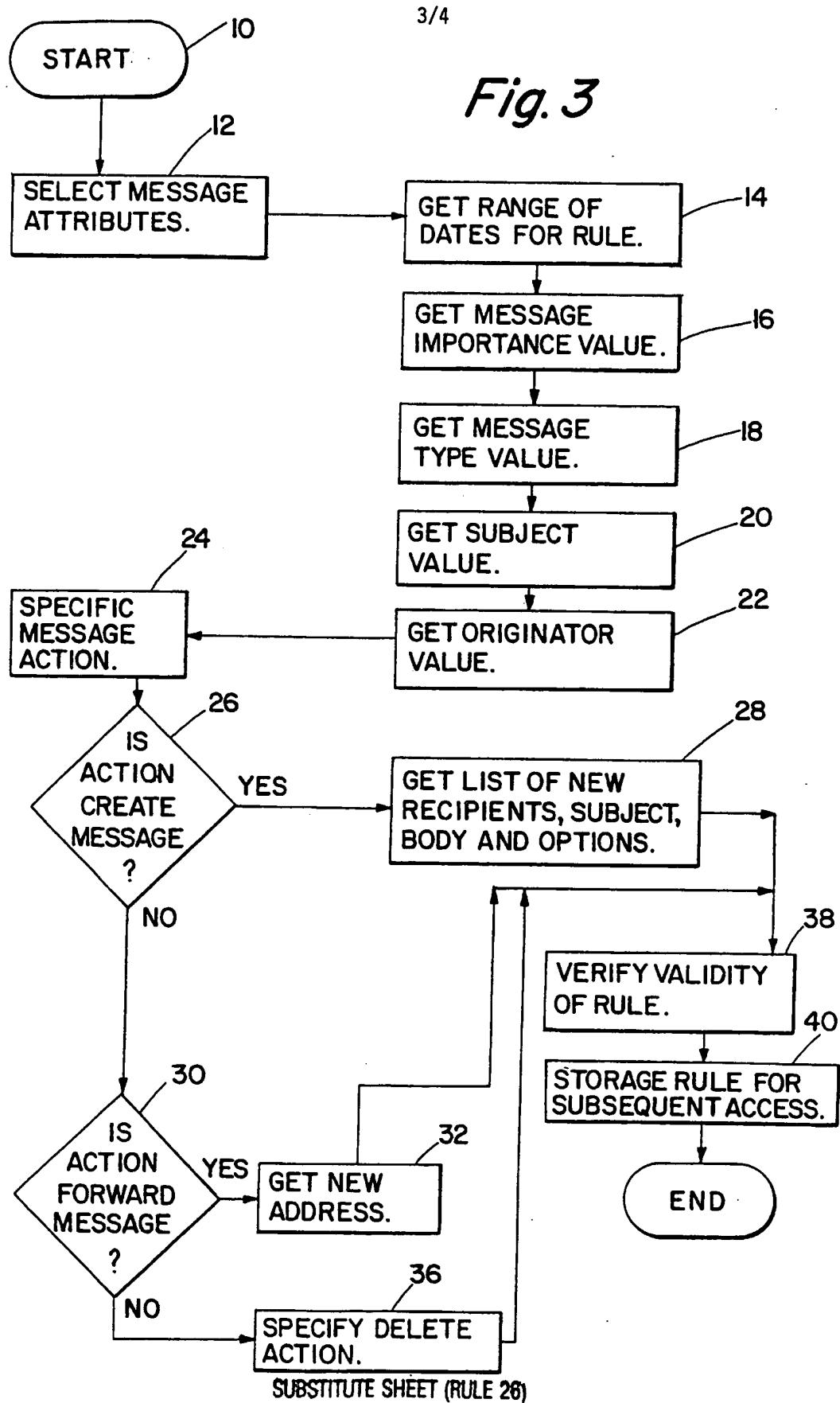


Fig. 2



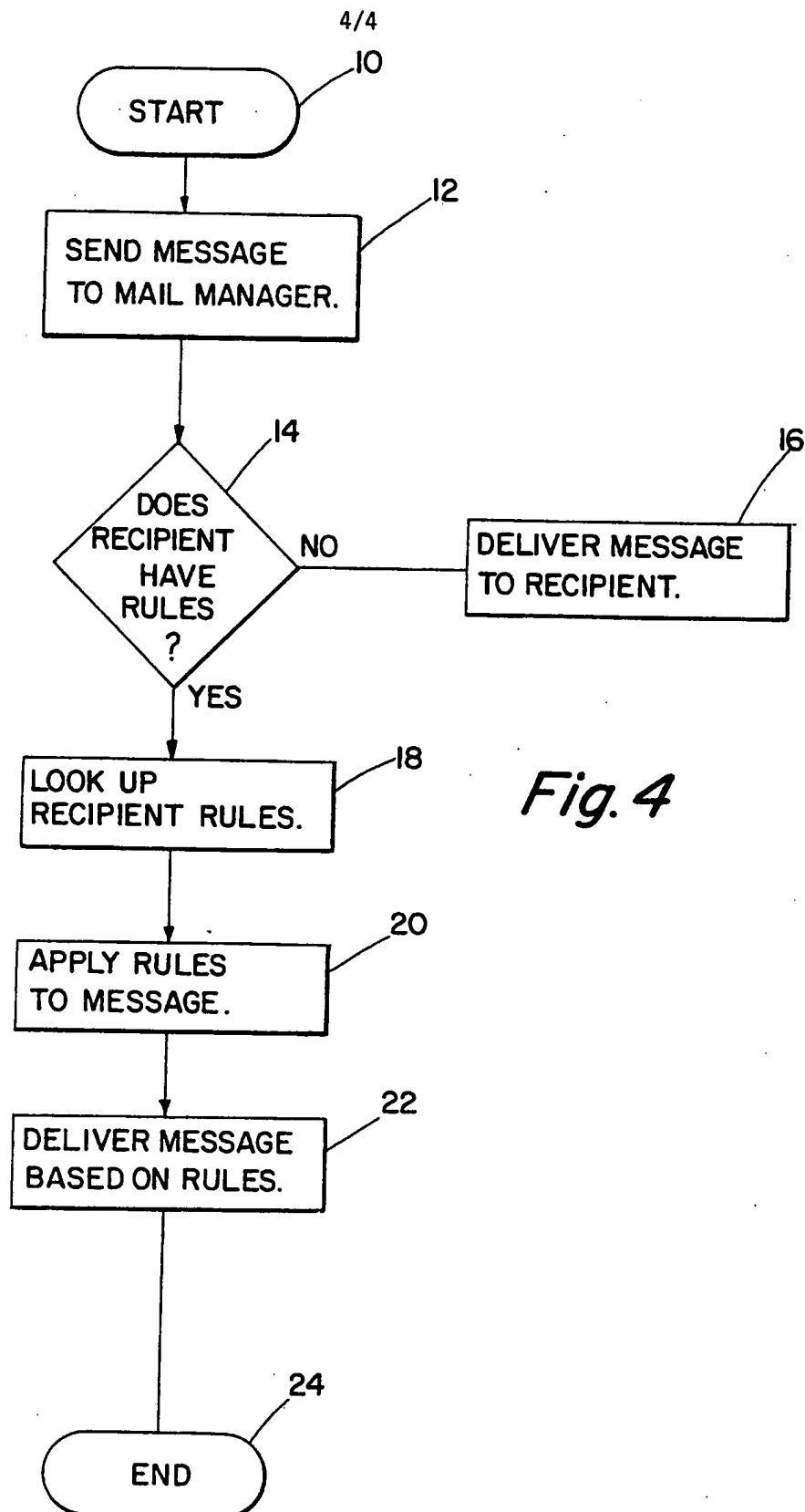


Fig. 4

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US96/06568

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER		
IPC(6) :G06F 13/14 US CL :395/200.16, 200.04 According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC		
B. FIELDS SEARCHED		
Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols) U.S. : 395/200.16, 200.04, 200.15, 200.06; 364/284.3, 241.7, 940.9; 379/93, 96		
Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched None		
Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used) USPTO APS, INSPEC search terms: email, electronic mail, reception, transmission, transaction, rules, policies, contraints, messaging, message processing		
C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		
Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	US, A, 5,283,856 (GROSS et al.) 01 February 1994 Abstract; Fig. 9; Column 9, lines 6-44	1-15
Y	US, A, 5,276,869 (FORREST et al.) 04 January 1994 Abstract; Column 6, lines 10-27	1-15
Y	US, A, 4,531,184 (WIGAN et al.) 23 July 1985 Abstract; Column 7, lines 22-38	1-15
Y	Proceedings of the 6th Australian Computer Science Conference, Sydney, NSW, Australia, 10-12 February 1983 C. J. Barter, "Transaction Processing in Message Passing Systems"; pp. 177-186 See Abstract and pages 180-182	1-15
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. <input type="checkbox"/> See patent family annex.		
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Date of the actual completion of the international search 30 AUGUST 1996	Date of mailing of the international search report 02 OCT 1996	
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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US96/06568

C (Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		
Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
A	US, A, 5,263,157 (JANIS) 16 November 1993 Abstract	1-15
A	US, A, 5,088,032 (BOSACK) 11 February 1992 Abstract	1-15